

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 9287

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, TH

SUBJ: STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL OF THE BANGKOK METROPOLITAN
ADMINISTRATION

SUMMARY: TWO VICE GOVERNORS AND 16 COUNCILMEN RESIGN IN AN
ATTEMPT TO BRING DOWN THE BANGKOK METROPOLITAN ADMINISTRATION
FOLLOWING MONTHS OF BITTER FUEDING. THE REAL STRUGGLE IS BETWEEN
INTERIOR MINISTER SAMAK SUNTHORAWET AND BANGKOK GOVERNOR
THAMMANUM THIANGGOEN, AND THAMMANUN'S CHANCES OF SURVIVAL
APPEAR TO BE BETTER THAN 50/50. END SUMMARY.

1. TWO OF BANGKOK'S FOUR VICE GOVERNORS, MONGKHON SIMAROT AND
CHARUT CHARUPHAKON, AND 14 OF THE CITY'S 41 COUNCILMEN RESIGNED
ON APR 26 IN PROTEST AGAINST THE ADMINISTRATION OF GOVERNOR
THAMMANUM THIANGGOEN. TWO MORE COUNCILMEN RESIGNED ON APR 27
WHEN THEY RETURNED TO BANGKOK FROM UP-COUNTRY TRIPS. THE
RESIGNATIONS FOLLOW MANY MONTHS OF BITTER FEUDING BETWEEN RIVAL
FACTIONS IN THE BANGKOK METROPOLITAN ADMINISTRATION (BMA).
BANGKOK NEWSPAPERS ARE SPECULATING THAT THE PRIME MINISTER WILL
NOW DISSOLVE THE BMA TO PAVE THE WAY FOR AN APPOINTED
GOVERNMENT OR NEW ELECTIONS, BUT IT IS PROBABLY PREMATURE TO
PREDICT THE PRESENT BMA'S DEMISE.

2. WHILE THE DISPUTE WITHIN THE BMA IS OSTENSIBLY ONE BETWEEN THE
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DISSIDENTS AND THE GOVERNOR OVER PAROCHIAL ADMINISTRATIVE
MATTERS, THE REAL ISSUES ARE NATIONAL. MOST OF THE BMA'S
DIFFICULTIES APPEAR TO STEM FROM RIVARLY BETWEEN THAMMANUN AND
MINISTER OF INTERIOR SAMAK SUNTHORAWET. THE BMA GENERALLY COMES
UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR (MOI), BUT IT IS
A RELATIVELY INDEPENDENT ENTITY, AND THE AMBITIOUS SAMAK EXER-
CISES ONLY LIMITED CONTROL OVER IT. THAMMANUN HAS SO FAR STRONGLY

RESISTED SAMAK'S ATTEMPTS TO GAIN MORE INFLUENCE IN THE BMA.

3. SAMAK, PERHAPS LOOKING AHEAD TO FUTURE GENERAL ELECTIONS, EVIDENTLY SEES GAINING CONTROL OF THE BMA AS AN IMPORTANT STEP IN CONSOLIDATING HIS POLITICAL POSITION, AND IN PARTICULAR STRENGTHENING HIS GRIP ON THE REMNANTS OF THE DEMOCRAT PARTY MACHINE, OF WHICH HE WAS A LEADING MEMBER. THERE ARE ALSO A NUMBER OF REPORTS FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES THAT SAMAK WOULD LIKE TO FINANCE HIS POLITICAL CAREER WITH MONEY DERIVED FROM PUBLIC WORKS PROJECTS IN THE CITY (A LUCRATIVE SOURCE OF INCOME FOR A NUMBER OF THAI OFFICIALS IN YEARS PAST).

4. THE PRESENT BMA WAS ELECTED IN AUGUST, 1975. THE GOVERNOR, VICE GOVERNORS, AND VIRTUALLY ALL OF THE COUNCILMEN CAME FROM THE DEMOCRAT PARTY. AT THAT TIME, THAMMANUN, A LONG TIME DEMOCRAT AND ONE OF THE DEPUTY PARTY LEADERS, AND SAMAK, ALSO A DEPUTY LEADER AND AN OUTSPOKEN MAVERICK, MAINTAINED AN UNEASY ALLIANCE AS MEMBERS OF THE CONSERVATIVE WING OF THE PARTY. FOLLOWING THE COUP OF OCTOBER 6, 1976, AND SAMAK'S ASCENDENCY TO THE MOI PORTFOLIO, THE ALLIANCE CAME APART.

5. SAMAK HAS PLAYED HIS SPOILING ROLE INDIRECTLY THROUGH MONGKHON AND CHARUT AND THE DISSIDENT ASSEMBLYMEN. HE HAS REPEATEDLY USED THEM TO UNDERCUT THAMMANUN, AND NOW, FINALLY, TO ATTEMPT TO FORCE HIM OUT OF OFFICE. SAMAK EVIDENTLY HOPES EITHER TO CONTROL THE APPOINTMENT OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT, OR, IF THERE ARE NEW ELECTIONS, TO GET HIM PEOPLE IN PLACE BY THAT MEANS.

6. THE FIRST SERIOUS PUBLIC DISPUTE BEGAN IN DECEMBER, 1976, WHEN
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THAMMANUN DECIDED TO ENFORCE LAWS FORBIDDING VENDORS FROM OBSTRUCTING PUBLIC THOROUGHFARES. THE MAJORITY OF "VENDORS" WERE REALLY PROSPEROUS CHINESE MERCHANTS DISPLAYING THEIR GOODS ON THE PAVEMENTS IN FRONT OF THEIR SHOPHOUSES, AND THEY BITTERLY RESENTED THE DECISION. SAMAK CHAMPIONED THESE "VENDORS", AND BLOCKED THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THAMMANUN'S PLAN. WHEN THE LATTER AGAIN ATTEMPTED TO CLEAR THE VENDORS FROM THE SIDEWALKS, SAMAK APPOINTED MONGKHON HEAD OF AN MOI COMMITTEE TO "INVESTIGATE" THE MATTER. THAMMANUN WAS FURIOUS, AND MARSHALLED HIS SUPPORTERS ON THE PRIME MINISTER'S ADVISORY COUNCIL (PMAC). THE PMAC FORCED SAMAK TO BACK DOWN IN PUBLIC.

7. SINCE THEN, MONGKHON AND CHARUT HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN A NUMBER OF OTHER DISPUTES WITH THAMMANUN, ALL HIGHLY PUBLICIZED. THAMMANUN'S REACTION HAS BEEN TO HOLD HIS GROUND, AND GRADUALLY TO STRIP THE TWO VICE GOVERNORS OF THEIR AUTHORITY IN THE BMA. HE HAS HAD MORE DIFFICULTY WITH MANY OF HIS PROJECTS, HOWEVER, WHICH REQUIRE MOI APPROVAL, AS SAMAK HAS HELD BACK FUNDING FOR SOME OF THEM.

8. THE LONG RUNNING DISPUTE HAS CAUSED SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES FOR THE BMA AND HAS BEEN A CONSTANT MINOR IRRITANT TO THE PEOPLE OF BANGKOK. BANGKOK CIVIL SERVICE EMPLOYEES ARE ALSO BECOMING DISGRUNTLED WITH THE PRESENT SITUATION. DISTRICT OFFICIALS, REPORTEDLY FED UP WITH THE HIGH HANDED MANNER AND CONSTANT DEMANDS OF SOME OF THE COUNCILMEN, HAVE RECENTLY BANDED TOGETHER WITH DEPUTY GOVERNOR NANTHAKA SUPRAPHATANAN (BANGKOK'S HIGHEST LEVEL CIVIL SERVANT) TO FORM A WORKING GROUP TO SCREEN ALL REQUESTS FROM COUNCILMEN. NANTHAKA HERSELF HAS COME UNDER STRONG ATTACK FROM MONGKHON AND CHARUT, WHO HAVE ACCUSED HER OF HOLDING UP THE VERY PROJECTS WHICH SAMAK IS DELAYING.

9. WHILE SAMAK IS PRESSING FOR A DECISION FROM THE THAI CABINET, IT IS FAIRLY CLEAR THAT ANY FINAL DECISION WILL BE MADE BY THE PMAC. SAMAK HAD HINTED THAT A DECISION WOULD BE ANNOUNCED ON APR 17 FOLLOWING THE WEDNESDAY CABINET MEETING, BUT MINISTER CONFIDENTIAL

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TO THE PRIME MINISTER DUSIT SIRIWAN ANNOUNCED AFTER THE MEETING ADJOURNED THAT THE MATTER WARRANTED FURTHER CONSIDERATION. SOURCES AT THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR HAVE INDICATED THAT THE PMAC WILL MAKE A DECISION ON THE ISSUE AT ITS APRIL 28 MEETING, AND PASS ITS DECISION ON TO THE CABINET FOR IMPLEMENTATION. SAMAK, ALREADY UNPOPULAR WITH MANY ON THE PMAC, MAY HAVE OVERPLAYED HIS HAND. THE WISEST POLITICAL COURSE IN PRESENT DAY THAILAND IS NOT CONFRONTATION WITH THE PMAC BUT ACCOMMODATION TO IT. THE EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT THAMMANUN HAS DONE A MUCH BETTER JOB OF THIS THAN HAS SAMAK.
WHITEHOUSE

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Message Attributes

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Disposition Approved on Date:
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Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
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